

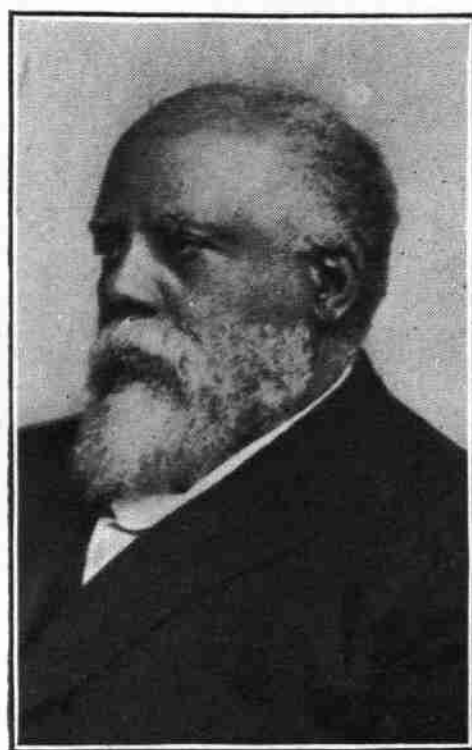
The Negro in the Days of Slavery

Bishop W. J. Gaines

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THE Negro to-day looks back a half century with strangely mingled emotions. Sorrow, pity, shame, indignation — yes, even pride — surge up within the bosom of every member of the race who was an eyewitness to its condition fifty years ago.

Those were the days when cotton was king, and the Negro — not man but a **THING**, a chattel — was hawked from the auction



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block like a beast, torn from families, and made to feel the brutal lash of overseers. Those were the days when the slaving millions made up the toilers, not only in cotton fields but in rice swamps and cane-brakes, that the South might be enriched. Those were the days when, despite the agitation as to the slavery question which made its way mysteriously to our ears in cabin quarters and plantation halls, the Negro was giving his time, his strength, his life, and even his loyalty, to those who

owned his body and sought to control his spirit. They were days of a past that plunged the iron deep into the very soul of the race and yet it ripened for the Negro a heritage of silent, patient, and long-suffering endurance. Then and in the preceding years of that long slavery were laid the foundations of both our vices and our virtues — laid in agony, in tears, and in blood.

Years Never to be Forgotten

The years bordering on the sixties of the last century were years never to be forgotten. The race was being strongly stirred throughout the South by the words that came to our ears of a long-hoped-for freedom for which we had prayed and yearned so earnestly; for the Negro ever longed for freedom, the natural birthright of every man, and he proved his manhood by his very longings. Nor was that longing limited to our elders. From the age of five, I felt this yearning within my own breast, though I may be said to have had a kind master.

"England's Great Queen, Victoria"

I used to wonder in my childish way why my father did not take part in the political and civil questions such as my child-ears heard discussed by General Robert Toombs, Alexander Stephens, Howell Cobb, and others. At that age, even, I questioned the justice of God in allowing one race to be held in bondage by another. When a mere child I heard that England's great queen, Victoria, was going to set us free, and my admiration toward her began then — an admiration that continued through her long reign. Yes, gentlemen, even the babes were desirous of freedom and were sensing the situation. We were slaves, however, but we had the same aspirations to be free and happy and possessors of knowledge that the white men experienced.

No Slave was Really Happy

We were not happy. No slave was really happy. It was an impossibility. No slave in the world was ever really happy. The race had simply learned to wear its mask and it wisely snatched what comfort and pleasure could be extracted from the situation from time to time. But the soul was free to aspire if the body was fettered and forced to lowly toil. The race aspired. It did more. It sought secretly ways and means to satisfy those aspirations, — for obtaining an education, gaining that knowledge that made the white man its superior. It was a blessing that it was thus active.

Here and there a little help was given from friendly quarters; from the white boy whose favor had been so won that he was willing to share his benefits with his darker playmates, or from the mistress whose heart was kind; here and there the "old chip" schools were found, where some needy white person would impart information secretly under the pretense of work. It was all precious when tattered leaves must seek strange hiding place, when with sinking heart they were lost again and again, and when the lash or worse was the penalty if discovered.

The Tragedy of the Situation

No white person can conceive of the tragedy of the situation. What joy to read at last! What joy to have the fountain of knowledge unsealed! The masters little knew of the amount of knowledge in their slaves' possession for years; yet it was never turned to the harm of the owners. So there grew up in the race of that period those here and there who were throwing off the yoke of ignorance and waiting for the dawn to break when they